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"What did We Fight for?"

A RESPONSE

BY

A. H. MATTOX,

Late First Lieutenant 17th Ohio Veteran Volunteer Battery of Light Artillery,

AT THE

SECOND ANNUAL REUNION

OF THE

BATTERY,

AT

SPRINGFIELD, OHIO, AUGUST 5th, 1886.

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"What Did We Fight For?"

Response by 1st Lieutenant A. H. Mattox.

Mr. Mayor, Comrades, and Friends:

The welcome extended to-night to the comrades of the Seventeenth Ohio Battery by the Chief Executive of this beautiful city comes from the heart and goes to the heart.

His eloquent words so cordial, so candid, so full of warmth, are appreciated, I am sure, by every one of us. In the name of the Seventeenth Ohio Battery I thank you, Mr. Mayor, and you, kind, true and loyal people of Springfield, for your kindly greetings and the many courtesies extended. You have indeed made us rich in welcome, and we thank you.

Allow me to say for myself that it is with grateful emotions I return to my native place on this occasion, and I personally wish to thank his Honor, the Mayor, and my dear good friends in Springfield, many of whom I have known from the days of my earliest recollections, for the gracious, generous and affectionate greetings that have met me almost continuously since my arrival.

There is no place in the world so dear to me as Springfield.

It is not now the town I knew twenty-five years ago, but—it is Springfield. It is the place where my father and mother were lovers, courted and married; it is the place of my birth; it is the town where I had my first love, and I would then have sworn that no angel in heaven was so pure, so beautiful, so lovely as *my* sweetheart, and—picturing her to-night as I saw and knew her then, I am still willing to make the same affirmation.

"Let Fate do her worst!
There are relics of joy,
Bright dreams of the past,
That she can not destroy;
That come in the night time
Of sorrow and care,
And bring back the features
That joy used to wear."

This is the place where all my boyhood associations and friendships were made, and none that I have formed in life since have been half so sweet, half so dear. Here, as a boy, when but seventeen years of age, I enlisted as a soldier, going forth with my friends and comrades to fill the humble place assigned me in the ranks of the Union army. By the blessing and kindness of Providence I was allowed to return in health and unscathed, but I was a boy no longer.

Time can not efface all the pleasant and tender recollections of the early years of my life spent in this, my old home. On the contrary, as years roll by, with the wrinkles and the white hairs comes a deeper and a holier love, a feeling of reverence, for my native place and the friends of my youth. I come back to these scenes with a tear of remembrance in my heart for the loved ones who have gone, never to come again, with a grateful heart for life and health, and with unfeigned and genuine affection for my comrades and friends here who, like myself, are spared to enjoy these meetings.

It is a pleasure to state that since we met, one year ago, death has not entered the ranks of our society. We should not, however, at this and all future meetings, fail to recall, in memory if not in name, the brave comrades of the Seventeenth Ohio Battery who perished in the field or have died since the close of the war.

Time has assuaged the sharpness of our grief at their loss, and the tender pain with which we think of them is mingled with a gratified sense of honorable pride. Their heroic courage and patriotism have placed their names forever on our country's roll of honor. Year after year it should be our sacred duty to scatter flowers over their hallowed graves. For months and long years we marched with them, "shoulder to shoulder, elbow touching elbow." Many of them perished by our sides

and were hastily buried on the field. That ground was consecrated and made holy by their blood! They shall never be forgotten! A grateful Nation has the care of the "unknown dead," and the grass shall ever grow green and the wild flowers shall ever blossom over the fields in which repose their sacred ashes!

Hail! chivalric dead! We mingle our tears over your graves. And--

> "When a soldier weeps o'er a brother's bier
> You may know that the *brave* is dead,
> For never yet was a soldier's tear
> Shed over a craven's head."

Fortunately our country is now enjoying an era of prosperity. The clouds of adversity and business depression which have so long lowered over our land are breaking, and the dawn of a better day is upon us. It should be the prayer of all good and patriotic citizens that peace, happiness and fraternal feeling may prevail throughout all our borders, and that our whole country, North and South, may move forward with gigantic strides in the pathway of prosperity and progress. Was not this what we fought for? If not, what did we fight for?

The soldiers of the Union saved the *South* as well as as the North. They made us a Nation. The soldiers of the Union were not seekers after vulgar glory. They

were not animated by the hope of plunder or the love of conquest. What, then, did they fight for?

They fought to preserve the homestead of liberty, and that their children might have peace.

They were the defenders of humanity, and they fought to break the chains of the monster of his time—hellish slavery.

They closed up and finished the fight commenced by the soldiers of the Revolution.

They lighted the torch that filled the world with the light of Freedom.

They fought to blot from the statute books laws that had been passed by hypocrites and made men the catchers of their fellow-men.

They made it possible for judges to be just, for statesmen to be humane, and—I was going to say for politicians to be honest, but that day, alas, will probably not come until the millennium arrives.

They fought to keep our country on the map of the world, and to hang our flag high in Heaven!

The Union soldiers were the saviors of the Nation, the liberators of men!

Grander than Greek, nobler than Roman, with a patriotism broader than the North, these soldiers fought for the rights of others, for the nobility of labor, that "idleness should not scar the back of patient toil, and

that the glorious 'old flag' should float over a country that had no master and no slave!"

Having fought for this, and surely it was enough to fight for, what did the Union soldiers do?

They quietly went home to their wives and mothers; to "the girl they left behind them;" to the counting-rooms, the offices, the fields and the shops. Were they demoralized? No! Had they been ennobled? Yes! They were as honest in peace as they had been in war. They worked and wrought with the labor of loyalty, and have made every promise of the Nation given during the war ring and gleam with gold.

The Southern people, when their soldiers laid down their arms, submitted not to the North, but to a Nation's will, and to the verdict of mankind. *They* were wrong, and the time has come when every intelligent man in the South will say, if he speaks that which is in his heart, that he is glad the North conquered and that they were vanquished by the right.

Freedom, not the North, conquered them, and Freedom now cultivates their fields, educates their children, weaves for them the robes of wealth, executes their laws and fills their land with happy homes. This is what the Union volunteers fought for. Here 's a bumper to the Union volunteer! To those who sleep in unknown, sunken graves, whose names are only in the hearts of

those they loved and left; to those who died in the prison pen, where famine mocked at want; to all the maimed and scarred; to all who dared—to the living and the dead!

Just now, and for some months past, where I live, in Cincinnati, all we hear of and have heard of is "fraud"—fraud in public life, fraud at the ballot-box. As men and as soldiers we all know, comrades, that every man who cares for the honor and safety of the country will wage a determined and unrelenting war against those who attempt by fraud to defeat the popular will. Much that is discreditable to the history of our country might have been avoided by a closer adherence to the wise precepts and virtuous methods of our ancestors. But it is not the part of wisdom to waste time in vain regrets. We have only to open our eyes to see the existence of palpable evils which, if not checked, must be destructive to our system of government. The adoption of the "spoils system" in politics is the rock that now stands in the way of good goverment. The prevalence of low opinions and dishonest practices is humiliating to us as a people and as a Nation, and will soon, if continued, hopelessly debauch the popular conscience. The recent numerous instances of frauds upon the elective franchise in the State of Ohio, and corruptions in office which have gone unpunished, are evidence

1652531

that the sacredness of the ballot and our institutions is not understood or appreciated by the people. Does not history teach us that the decay of public virtue is almost always the sure precursor of national ruin?

The deterioration in national morality, although obscure at the outset, is uncontrollable in its latter stages and fatal in the end. Vices are readily initiated under any circumstances, but they are more alluring when tricked out with the insignia of authority. Bribery in office and fraud at the polls will never be abolished until the honest and intelligent men of the country, who already see and deprecate them, seriously undertake their reformation. While the deep throat of our cannon are rusting, our sabers and muskets standing quietly in the corners, and our glorious bullet-scarred and battered banners are furled in the armories of State or Nation, this question of purity of the ballot and honesty in office comes before the volunteers of both the Union and Confederate armies, and they must fight it with the eye and heart and crush it out as though it were as vile a thing as treason itself.

As long as fraud at the polls and bribery in office rule, our banner is not the banner of truth, liberty and freedom. As the Union volunteers took the manacles from the limbs of men chained in the deep gulf of despair, so let them knock the shackles of dishonesty and

corruption from the ballot-box and place it where, forever under the glorious sunlight of truth, all bad and evil men will be driven away and the elective franchise will be kept "as pure as snow and as chaste as ice."

And now, "boys," comrades, one word more and I am done, and I thank you for your patient hearing.

We are one—one by the deathless memories of the past; one by the common needs of the present; one by the glorious hopes of the future. Let us remember this and let us strive to keep the escutcheon of the Seventeenth Ohio Battery as pure and free from taint in the future as it has been in the past. Remember that every battle which you fought and every victory which you achieved was the expression of the great thoughts of self-government, political equality and national integrity. As we fought for self-government, let us continue to show, as we have shown, that *we can* govern ourselves. Let us daily, until we die, thank the God of Hosts that when the end came it was the triumph of right over wrong; of justice over injustice, and that when the rebellion fell it was an utter wreck, resounding with a crash that was heard of all the nations of the earth.

We can not be too thankful for this most delightful and satisfactory reunion. As time moves on, each year we shall drop out with constantly increasing rapidity

until—and soon—in the nature of things, none of us, and none of the other actors in the great conflict will be left on earth. Our race is nearly run, but we have fought a good fight, and neither ingratitude nor injustice; neither the forgetfulness of the object for which we fought nor surrender of the results achieved, can ever deprive us of the approval and the gratitude of future generations.

May blessings and honors rest with the living—sweet and loved be the memories of the dead!

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